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# A view from the dawn of time

*Utah, the setting for Danny Boyle's new film, '127 Hours', has its own natural drama, as Jolyon Attwooll discovers. Overleaf: win a trip to see the area's glorious national parks*

I leant over the lip of the sandstone precipice and cursed the adrenalin surge that was making my legs tremble. After all, this was supposed to be an abseil for beginners.

Valoree, a bespectacled 50 year-old from Arkansas, had already glided down the sheer, 60ft cliff just beyond Zion National Park in Utah. Her friend, Nicolas, a smoker from Sweden in his mid-forties, had positively powered down. Then Alastair, a *Telegraph* video journalist, decided to choose that day to overcome a lifelong fear of heights and ease his way down.

Our guide, Hank "calves of steel" Moon, was now waiting only for me. As I contemplated the overhang, I recalled reading how a man called Aron Ralston had once abseiled down a similar height. His circumstances, I reminded myself, were slightly more challenging than mine. Half-starved, with a raging thirst, he had managed a descent using just one hand, a makeshift sling protecting a bloodied stump where his right arm used to be.

And so I leant back into thin air. Feeding rope through the cantilever, I lowered myself, unsteadily at first, then more gracefully as my legs finally found a use for the adrenalin and bounced me down to terra firma and the others in the gully below.

Ralston was, indirectly, the reason I found myself stepping off cliff faces in Utah. This was canyoning, a mixture of hiking,

climbing and abseiling, a novice's experience of the sport that Ralston was enjoying on a glorious spring day in 2003. As he was traversing Blue John Canyon on the edge of Canyonlands National Park in south-eastern Utah, he dislodged a half-ton boulder, which fell and pinned his right arm against the canyon wall.

After five tortured days, with no one knowing where he was and all other options exhausted, he cut off his lower right arm with a blunt multi-tool penknife. He then hiked several miles – including the 65ft abseil – before being picked up by a rescue helicopter.

Now Danny Boyle, in his first film since *Slumdog Millionaire*, has turned this extraordinary tale into a film, *127 Hours* (released in Britain earlier this week). Starring James Franco, who has been nominated for a Golden Globe award, as Ralston, it is a compelling, sometimes grisly, retelling of a remarkable escape and its redemptive effect on the protagonist.

The film also exhibits Utah in unbridled glory: panoramic shots linger on the patterns, shapes and rainbow hues of the state's canyon lands. The cinematography and the film's breathless sense of adventure arguably make it the biggest publicity bonanza for the area since John Ford shot *Stagecoach* in Monument Valley – no mean feat for a film with an amputation scene.

In fact, *127 Hours* is just the latest in a line of films – stretching from *Stagecoach* to

*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Forrest Gump* – that use Utah as a backdrop. (Cultural note: don't mistake a Utah scene for Arizona. Three times I heard of *Thelma and Louise* being filmed in Utah; three times I heard the teller lamenting the appearance of an Arizona traffic cop on a Utah road).

While few visitors would care to chase the physical demands and risks of Ralston's approach, there are less taxing routes to adventure. Our foray into canyoning was within an hour's drive of civilisation, conducted under the eye of an expert –

*Continued overleaf* ►

## Basics

● TrekAmerica (020 8682 8920; [www.trekamerica.com](http://www.trekamerica.com)) has a 10-day Canyon Adventure tour from £1,399. Grand American Adventures (020 8682 8920;

[www.grandamericanadventures.com](http://www.grandamericanadventures.com)) has a 28-day "National Parks of the West" tour starting in San Francisco, from £3,319. Both prices include flights.

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a small taster of what Ralston did on his own, almost on a whim, in the middle of nowhere.

In our week-long whistle-stop tour, the closest we got to the physical canyon environment – although not the isolation – of Ralston's ordeal was near the town of Page, across the Arizona border.

While Ralston biked and walked to Blue John, I was taken in a 4WD convoy right to the mouth of the upper Antelope Canyon, one of the most popular and accessible slot canyons in the south-western United States. Our Navajo guide shepherded us along a procession of photo opportunities within the natural stone corridor, directing our cameras towards different shapes and patterns in the smooth sandstone.

Then desert rain began to fall. Water cascaded off the sheer canyon walls, puddles becoming pools within seconds. As we scurried back to the shelter of the vehicle, a waterfall was already tumbling by the canyon entrance. Then, as the downpour stopped, and the cascades ebbed then died, we half-wondered if we had imagined it all.

In a way, the downpour was serendipitous, like a live geology lesson demonstrating the origins of the sinuous canyon. Flash floods have chiselled and smoothed the rock here – and occasionally claimed human lives. A dream sequence in *127 Hours* hints at the real danger posed by heavy rainfall in this arid land.

With or without the rain, few places on the planet show the Earth's elemental shifts as dramatically as here. Topography can define a visit here, the area's extraordinary shapes tempting even unscientific journalists into amateur geology.

We hiked to see Delicate Arch, the free-standing arch that is a symbol of the state (once a sandstone "fin" eroded by weather and water); trekked in mighty Zion National Park, where a bighorn sheep stood at the roadside welcoming us to the park's towering gorges (erosion by a tributary of the Colorado River); and drove through the familiar formations of Monument Valley (where the red colour comes from iron oxide in the siltstone).

Geological complexities were explained many times during our visit, with varying degrees of success. Perhaps the best explanation came from a ranger in Arches National Park, flexing a washing-up sponge with judicious slits and colourings to illustrate the forces that pushed salt layers up and cracked the land around.

I also discovered that this is a place where all 13 periods of geological time scale are

represented in the rock layers (the Grand Canyon shows only seven); where you can stop the car if you're with someone in the know and see allosaurus footprints fossilised in the rock near your tyres.

Of all the geological masterpieces we saw, for me the greatest was Bryce Canyon National Park. In *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, his highly readable book about

his accident and his life leading up to it, Ralston traces his love of canyons back to a family outing there.

Despite reading this account, and seeing photographs, I was still unprepared. Words caught in my throat when I broached a viewpoint. The 300ft canyon plunged below, peopled with myriad, sentinel-like pink and orange sandstone towers rising from the floor – a field of hoodoos, formed by cycles of freeze and thaw, whose freakish beauty stopped me short.

Ralston, whose enthusiasm for adventure was undimmed even after what he calls his "farewell to arm", also wrote evocatively of the extraordinary natural forces at work. This is his description of a visit to a hoodoo site known as the Doll's House in Canyonlands: "The features and formative processes of the desert... made me pause... I had the unexpected feeling that I was watching the ongoing birth of an entire landscape, as if I were standing on the rim of an exploding caldera. The vista held for me a feeling of the dawn of time, that primordial epoch before life when there was only desolate land."

After a week travelling near the place where his life changed for ever, I knew what he meant. Adrenalin may cloud the sensation when you are steeling yourself for an abseil descent – although that comes with its own rewards. But stand at the lip of Bryce Canyon, and, if you can, wander away from the crowds into the amphitheatre below. Then you will understand.

#### **Watch online**

Watch footage of a novice canyoneer descending cliff faces in the [Utah](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel) wilderness  
[www.telegraph.co.uk/travel](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel)



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### What to do and see in Utah

#### See the bison of Antelope Island

See the wild bison from horseback on Antelope Island State Park, the largest island in the Great Salt Lake. If you are confident in the saddle, the bison are rounded up in October, and the public can take part.

More information [www.randghorseandwagon.com](http://www.randghorseandwagon.com)

#### Take a Hummer tour near Moab

This is not as ecologically flawed as it might sound because these monstrous military style vehicles run on biodiesel. There can be few more exhilarating ways of discovering the badlands of the area – you might even see dinosaur footprints by the roadside.

More information [Moab Adventure Center \(www.moabadventurecenter.com\)](http://www.moabadventurecenter.com)

#### Go canyoning near Zion National Park

Hike, climb, abseil and chimney (shimmying your way down confined canyon walls) in the wilderness just outside Zion National Park. All abilities are catered for.

More information [Zion Adventure Company \(www.zionadventures.com\)](http://www.zionadventures.com)

#### See Bryce Canyon by night

Captivating by day, this national park is also an extraordinary place to visit at night, with light pollution almost non-existent. Guides are on hand to point out the best places from which to view the heavens.

More information [Bryce Canyon National Park \(www.nps.gov/bryca\)](http://www.nps.gov/bryca)

#### Ski in deep, dry powder

The mountains surrounding Salt Lake City are known for the

unusually deep, dry snow that falls from late October to March. The powdery conditions, a climatic quirk due to the salinity of the nearby lake, draw unusually zealous fans of the skiing. Many of the resorts are within an hour's drive of Salt Lake City airport.

More information [www.skiutah.com](http://www.skiutah.com)

#### Eat in a Mormon temple complex

The capital of Utah, Salt Lake City, is well known for its thriving Mormon religious community. In the heart of the central Temple Square, visitors can eat at the Roof Restaurant with views over the imposing temple and the city. No alcohol is served.

More information [Temple Square \(www.temple-square-hospitality.com\)](http://www.temple-square-hospitality.com)

#### Go where the wild things were

Utah was prime dinosaur territory and archaeological discoveries are still being made. Later this year, a revamped Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City will open to the public with exhibits on the area's remarkable geology and wildlife, past and present.

More information [Utah Museum of Natural History \(http://umnh.utah.edu/home\)](http://umnh.utah.edu/home)

#### Hike to Delicate Arch

If one geological feature has defined the State of Utah, this is it – the shape appears in licence plates and is instantly recognisable. It is also quite easy to reach, a three-mile round-trip hike over a remarkable, swirling sandstone landscape.

More information [The Arches National Park \(www.nps.gov/arch\)](http://www.nps.gov/arch)

#### Take a tour of Antelope Canyon

If you are pressed for time and would like an introduction to canyon culture, take a tour from the Arizona town of Page. The canyon's swirls and curves are mesmerising – but be prepared for crowds.

More information [Antelope Canyon Tours \(www.antelopecanyon.com\)](http://www.antelopecanyon.com)

#### See the area's finest Indian pottery

One of the largest collections of ancestral Indian pottery can be seen at the Edge of the Cedars State Park Museum. The collection includes many well-preserved, finely wrought artefacts and an authentic Puebloan village behind the museum.

More information [www.stateparks.utah.gov](http://www.stateparks.utah.gov)





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Left to right, from above: a still from '127 Hours'; celestial sunbeams at upper Antelope Canyon, one of the area's most accessible slot canyons; the wild bison of Antelope Island; and Salt Lake City's temple complex





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**Bryce Canyon (above)**  
inspired Aron Ralston,  
whose remarkable tale  
has been turned into a  
film by Danny Boyle